



World Council of Churches

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Geneva, 23 November 2020

H.E. Audrey Azoulay
Director-General
UNESCO

Madame Director-General,

Re: Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh's Armenian historical, religious and cultural heritage

The World Council of Churches is a global fellowship of churches in over 120 countries and territories, representing an estimated 580 million people. Included among WCC's more than 350 member churches are the Armenian Apostolic Church (Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin) and the Armenian Apostolic Church (Holy See of Cilicia).

At its recent meeting on 9-13 November 2020, the WCC Executive Committee adopted a statement on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in which, inter alia, it appealed for "respect for the holy sites and cultural heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh" and urged "UNESCO to take all possible and appropriate measures to protect these sites."

<https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict>)

Our concern for the religious and cultural heritage of the region, specifically in the areas newly under Azerbaijani control, is greatly heightened by the repeated shelling of the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral in Shushi that occurred on 8 October, and especially by the numerous reports we are receiving of other more recent desecrations.

It appears that Azerbaijan has already started rewriting the cultural history of Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh and that Armenian churches will be reassigned to others or will be turned into mosques (cf. the various tweets of Anar Karimov, the Acting Minister for Culture of the Republic of Azerbaijan). Furthermore, Azerbaijan had already destroyed the ancient and very important cemetery of Julfa in Nakhichevan.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/mar/01/monumental-loss-azerbaijan-cultural-genocide-khachkars>)

There are an estimated 4,000 historical, religious and cultural monuments in the areas of Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh now under Azerbaijani control – each of them with a powerful spiritual and cultural legacy to impart. The loss of this heritage would be an irreparable loss for the whole of humanity. (A database of the majority – an estimated 90% – of the religious and cultural sites concerned is available at this link:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1dnMSkwQcIEEabfCnXBnW74PS1xOiHmhZ?usp=sharing>)

We therefore urge UNESCO to take all possible and appropriate measures to protect these sites on the affected territories. In this regard, we welcome the proposal for a preliminary field mission, in order to draw up an inventory of the most significant cultural assets, as a prerequisite for effective protection of the region's heritage.

We hope that UNESCO and other global heritage organizations will be able to anticipate and take swift measures to prevent the crisis of heritage loss that is otherwise likely to unfold.

Yours sincerely,



Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Saucă
Interim General Secretary
World Council of Churches